

*Owl Man's drug of choice ...*

Owl Man stared at his computer screen trying to focus. The spots before his eyes were not spots but periods, which one could argue, if there were anyone to argue with, were spots after all, albeit small spots. And how large would a spot be before it was not a spot any more but a ... a what? He had to figure out some new tricks to reel in this wiggling thought-fish his stream of consciousness seemed so full of at the least provocation.

He'd spent the night in his chair, never a good idea, given the crick in his neck that was full-on this morning. That, plus the fuzz that was his mind just now, announced the need for some external clarifying agent. Tully's was much too far, given Owl Man's state, so it was to the kitchen he managed to haul himself, himself being a very heavy load indeed. But his trusty Krups Pro coffee brewer set for espresso would rescue him in no time at all. Well, no time was a little too hopeful as it would take several minutes, as always. His habits kicked in: beans from the freezer, beans into grinder, grinder into basket, bottled water into brewer, switch set to espresso, On button on, an Everest of accomplishment, particularly with his nose sniffing the air. Not the aroma of coffee just yet, too soon. Was it Jasmine he was smelling? Not *her* exactly, but her sweet smell, which was enough.

Yet, before he could imagine too far along this path, it was

the coffee maker that exuded the more powerful aroma and already, in anticipation, his mind began to clear. He breathed deep and deeper still, luxuriating in the promise of his drug of choice.

*Fex has a problem ...*

Beethoven's Fifth sounded on the cellphone in Owl Man's pocket and, as usual, began vibrating before he could get to it. Finally he extracted it, flipped it open and answered, his ear bent to his shoulder holding the cell as he poured himself a rather large dose of the dark espresso.

"Owl Man here," he grunted almost brusquely.

"Hey, Owl Man. Meet me at Tully's in an hour. It's important."

"Good morning, Fex. Always good to hear from you."

"Cut the bullshit, Owl Man. I said this is important."

"It's always important when you're calling, Fex. But I've got plans for the morning."

"Well, cancel 'em. I need to talk to you. Right away."

"Where's Coo? Can't you talk to him?"

"Are you kiddin'? I might as well be talkin' to my shoe. No, there's somethin' that's been eatin' at me. I gotta talk to you, not Coo." Fex was determined. "Cancel your plans, Owl Man, and meet me at Tully's at eleven."

"Well, I *am* always entertained by our conversations, Fex. Sure, I'll cancel my plans. I want to see what the big deal is this time, what's sticking in your craw, as they say."

"Fuck what they say, Owl Man. Just be there."

Click.

For a moment Owl Man imagined a scene from the movie “Patton,” only instead of George C. Scott, Fex had been cast in the role of General George Patton. It was Fex who wore the chrome-plated pistols, carried the riding crop, barked orders at his inferiors, barked at his superiors, barked at everyone in general.

In truth, Owl Man was just testing Fex, since his “plans for the morning” involved nothing more pressing than returning a library book, which was not yet due, and picking up more coffee filters. So he happily set out to make the urgent appointment with Fex at Tully’s.

Perhaps “happily” is the wrong word, since it does not quite tell the whole story of Owl Man’s mood that morning. As he drove through traffic to Fourth and Union, he pondered his situation. He had been experiencing a surprising degree of preoccupation with young Jasmine and his upcoming rendezvous with her. Frankly, he was of two minds about the whole affair, if that’s the right word. Part of him was annoyed—with her, with himself and with the distraction she brought into his life. Another part was intrigued—down to the toes. There was no question that for him to become involved with her would be a blow to his dignity as a mature, professorial writer whose most joyful moments were generally limited to combing through bookshelves, haunting antiquarian bookstores or tapping into the flow of words and images in a deep writer’s trance.

Yes, from that perspective, flirting with Jasmine was

definitely undignified.

And yet ... it had been many years since he had walked with such a spring in his step, since the blooming of narcissus and daffodil and crocus, pushing their way past recent ice and snow, had seemed so exhilarating.

Yes, flirting with Jasmine had definitely added unexpected sap and vigor to his bloodstream.

He was even embarrassed to discover, on his desk, a notepad filled with florid doodles from a telephone conversation with Heron Man. They had been discussing technical details of the upcoming “film-shoot,” the heist itself and the getaway logistics.

Now, unconscious doodles had always been of more than passing interest to Owl Man, who had a certain flair for interpreting such scribbles—on the part of others, at least. But these, and from his own hand, were revealing to a degree that even Owl Man, with all his experience and wisdom, was reluctant to claim as his own.

And what was so revealing about the doodles?

For one thing, they consisted mainly of the name, “Jasmine,” written over and over. Very well, he thought: mere repetition of a glyph while concentration busied itself elsewhere. Nothing to that, really, nothing to it at all, he argued rather defensively.

It was the character of the lines, however, that set Owl Man to examining his own heart. For when he looked at the notepad what struck him most were the soaring, idealistic upper loops at the top of the “J,” and the fulsome, sensuous lower loops at the bottom.

Owl Man knew enough elementary graphology to recognize a dangerous dichotomy building up, between the swelling upper and the swelling lower elements—ideals pulling against appetites. It seemed that, unconsciously, a great deal of psychic energy was surging in two opposing directions.

Yes, this was definitely a precarious situation, one that Owl Man had best navigate with a lantern in one hand, a sounding line in the other, his teeth on the wheel and his eyes on the waters ahead. There was too much at stake for him to risk running his keel aground amidst treacherous shoals.

For example, there was the novel he and Heron Man were co-authoring, which represented a considerable investment in time and energy. Then there was the heist itself—a criminal undertaking with which neither he nor Heron Man had any real experience, and which neither writer wanted to bungle, especially since they could hardly count on their characters—Fex and Coe, et al.—to pull it off.

There was the not inconsequential matter of Jasmine's feelings and the risks of hurting her, whether with a stiff, puritanical rebuff—all on the basis of his “dignity”—or an ill-considered wallowing in emotions and “the flesh”—on the similarly flimsy excuse of “I couldn't help it.” Either course held potential dangers for Jasmine.

Finally, there was the small matter of his own heart, which, for all his years of having lived the storms and passions that are the portion of any man's existence, still harbored a slight measure of

vulnerability, sequestered in a tiny, dark corner of its otherwise vast chambers.

“Yes,” Owl Man voiced the word aloud this time, “yes, I must stay balanced.”

To his surprise, he was already sitting at the table in Tully’s as he spoke these last words. So intent had he been, so focused on his internal soliloquy—or was it a dialogue?—that he had parked his Prius, walked to the coffee shop, entered, picked a table and sat down, without the slightest disruption of his solemn reflections.

No sooner had he realized where he actually was than Fex arrived and began dragging a chair to the table. He made no effort to prevent its scraping and grating noisily across the floor. Owl Man grimaced reflexively and held his hands to his ears.

Fex sat down heavily and—just as he had when he and Owl Man first met—slammed his hand on the table. It was one of his favorite gestures, apparently. Only this time, fortunately, there was no coffee to spill. Owl Man dropped his hands from his ears and reached out in time to prevent his laptop from bouncing off the table.

“Will you turn that fucking thing off, Owl Man?”

Owl Man kept one hand on the computer.

“Oh, hi, Fex. Nice to see you. Does my computer make you nervous?”

“Damn right it makes me nervous. That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

“About being nervous?”

“No, idiot. About that damn computer.”

“What’s the problem, Fex?”

“You know the other day? At the houseboat? The day you made me disappear?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well, I been thinkin’ about it. But now I’m all fucked up, and it’s your fault.”

“You’ll have to give me more details, Fex.”

Owl Man pushed the computer carefully to one side, but kept his hand on it. He didn’t want it to fall victim to one of Fex’s sudden, dramatic gestures. He looked into Fex’s eyes. They were bloodshot and had dark rings under them.

“You look like you haven’t been sleeping well, Fex.”

“I ain’t had any sleep for three days now. This is drivin’ me crazy.”

“What is ‘this’, Fex?”

“This thing about me disappearin’. You hit a goddamn key on that computer and I disappeared. It ain’t possible. But Heather saw it. She was there. It’s been drivin’ her crazy, too.”

Owl Man appreciated Fex’s difficulty. How could Fex possibly understand what had happened? It was beyond him. It was even—truth be told—beyond Owl Man. How could he explain to Fex about the reality of the *mundus imaginalis*? These things touched a mystery that grips any writer who gives free rein to the



imagination. For example, how could a character as outrageous, as patently fictional as Fex, actually come to life in Owl Man's imagination—no, in his *life*? Owl Man had no real answer, but there it was, the sheer reality of it, the looming material fact of it, like the butter on your morning toast. No, like the marmalade on your morning toast. No, no. Like the money in your bank account. No, too abstract—

But Owl Man caught himself going off into that “writer’s space” that was intriguing and bedeviling in equal measure, chasing words around the block in search of *le mot juste*—just the right word.

“Uh, sorry, Fex. I got distracted there for a moment.”

“Well, fuck off, Owl Man. I need help here.” That was a big admission for Fex to make.

“Yes, I understand what you’re saying. Of course it’s upsetting.”

“And here’s another thing. I been tryin’ to figure out how we can use that button in the heist.”

“In the heist? Like how?”

Before Fex could answer, Jimmy the barista, who had noticed Owl Man and Fex sitting without any coffee, took the initiative and brought a *macchiato* for Owl Man and a plain drip for Fex. He knew their tastes. He also knew that, of the two men, at least Owl Man would leave a generous tip.

“Hey, thanks, Jimmy. We forgot to order.”

“No problem, guys. This one’s on me. On Tully, that is.”

Jimmy chuckled and returned to the bar. He knew he would make up for the loss of two coffees by the tip and by his gains in good will, good referrals and the sheer volume of return business.

“Like I was sayin’, Owl Man. Let’s say I go in there—”

“In where?”

“In the bank, for Christ’s sake. Ain’t you listenin’?”

“OK, Fex. Go ahead. I’m with you now.”

Normally Owl Man would be more attentive, but he still had Jasmine on his mind. Or more precisely, on his left elbow.

“Now, I go in there and you hit that button on your computer, whatever the hell it is.”

“The ‘Delete’ key.”

“Yeah. Then I disappear, OK? Then I grab the bags, walk outside nice an’ easy, and give the bags to Mr. Moto, who’s waitin’ for me. What’s wrong with that?”

“Well, in principle, nothing, Fex, except for a few details.”

“Like what?”

“Like, for example, the last time I hit the button you didn’t like the place you went to after disappearing. Remember?”

“You mean the bilge, or whatever it was?”

“Yes. It was like a bilge, you said. It was beneath your floor, and there were dead and living things floating and swimming in it. When you came back you said you had been dreaming.”

“Yeah, I remember that. I didn’t like it.”

“Well, what’s to stop you from going to that same place, or something worse, right in the middle of a heist?”

“You tell me, Owl Man, you’re the witch doctor. Is that the only detail?”

“No, there’s also the matter of Mr. Moto.”

“What about Mr. Moto?”

“Well, if you disappear, he won’t be in your dream, he’ll be outside of it, so how can he take the money from you while you’re still ‘disappeared’? You’ll be in the bilge place, most likely, and Mr. Moto will be in the bank with the rest of us. Who knows where Mr. Moto would end up if I disappeared him too?”

“No, no, no, no, Owl Man. You still don’t get it. You write me up so I don’t go to that bilge place. Get it? You write me up so there’s a big pile of money, nice and clean, fresh from the Brinks laundry, just sittin’ there for me to pick it up. Put Mr. Moto there too.”

“Now I’m afraid *you* don’t get it, Fex.”

“Whatdya mean?”

“I mean that I can make you disappear, yes, but I have no control over where you go when you disappear, what dream you go into. Sure, I can write up a dream *for* you, but it won’t be the real thing. But if I delete you, like you’re saying, then wherever you go will be real, a real dream, and you may not like it.”

Owl Man took a sip of *macchiato*. Fex hadn’t drunk any of his plain drip yet.

“Or let’s say you do like it,” he continued. “It’s such a pleasant dream place that you don’t want to come back to the bank. Then we’re all left standing there like fools, wondering where the hell Fex went and whether he’s ever going to come back. And as for Mr. Moto, I don’t even want to speculate on what his dream would be.”

Owl Man took another sip.

“The reason I don’t have any control over that dream place where deleted people go is because dreams are real places. There really *is* a bilge with all those things crawling in it. And they belong to you, Fex. They’re *your* dream.”

Owl Man paused for effect. “Now do you see what I mean?”

“Yeah, maybe. Sure, I get it. No, maybe I don’t get it. Maybe this whole thing is gettin’ *me*.”

Owl Man tilted his head, waiting, and just looked at Fex. After a moment of silence, Fex spoke slowly, hesitantly.

“Maybe Foxy ... had the right ... idea.” Fex was struggling, as if trying to visualize the solution to a puzzle. “Maybe she just goes in there ... blastin’ away with her Tommy gun, like she said ... and *then* I grab the dough.”

“Sure, Fex. And how far do you think Foxy’s going to get? With a murder rap hanging over her head? Over *our* heads? We’d all be jumping every time the doorbell rings. Looking for the “Wanted: Dead or Alive” posters in every bank lobby, Post Office and Dunkin’ Donuts from here to Tallahassee. Your full name

would be spelled out for everyone to see. Would you like that? No, we've got to have more finesse than that, Fex."

Owl Man's string of plausible scenarios was just realistic enough to induce a trickle of doubt in Fex's mind.

"Yeah, OK then, maybe not, maybe not, Owl Man. Maybe you got somethin' there." Fex hated admitting someone else might have a point. "But there oughtta be some way you can use that button thing."

"Well, let's forget the computer for a moment. Let's say I exert a little 'mind control,' for example, in the bank lobby. It would be a bit like hypnotism, something shamanic, really. That might work. But I definitely don't think it's a good idea to make you disappear with the Delete key. That's too dangerous. You're not a lucid dreamer."

"Not a what?"

"A lucid dreamer. Someone who can wake up in a dream and carry out intentions while still dreaming—actions like flying, for example."

Fex turned his head and looked at the floor, as if his shoelaces were untied.

"Jesus, Owl Man. I went out of my fuckin' way on that button thing, way out on a limb, which now you say don't even work. And now you're back on your flyin' carpet, tellin' me you can hypnotize Ling Bank and fly in dreams. Can't you just talk straight for a change?"

“You *can* fly in a dream, Fex. That is, *someone* can. It depends on the dreamer. But apparently all *you* can do is slosh around in funky bilge water, dodging corpses.”

“All right, all right. Don’t start talking about that bilge again. Gives me the creeps. Just go back to what you were sayin’, about what you claim you’re gonna control. Say it again.”

“I was saying, Fex, that I’ll bend the ‘reality field,’ as I call it. Distort people’s perceptions, just a wee bit. It would be like knocking a radio dial slightly off the signal so there’s some static coming over the speakers. It’s a combination of hocus-pocus and quantum physics.”

“See, Owl Man? There you go again. Now I know you’re nuts.” Fex, always volatile, was approaching a boil again. “You’re talkin’ about that witch doctor bullshit again. Why don’t you just bring your Ouija Board and have a séance with Jolene and Old Man Ling?”

“Well, Fex, wasn’t your idea about the Delete key a bunch of witch doctor bullshit?”

Fex put his thick hands to his forehead as if he had a headache.

“What? My idea? Oh, yeah. I don’t know. I tell ya, Owl Man, my head ain’t screwed on right any more. It don’t feel too good.”

“Just leave the screwing to me, Fex. I’ll work on this idea. Maybe I can come up with something. Meanwhile, just relax and

keep practicing your lines.”

“What lines?”

“The ones your Stanislavski character comes up with.”

“Oh yeah, them. Yeah, me and Heather are doin’ good.”

“I’m sure you are, Fex. Well, I think that’s about all I have time for right now.”

*Owl Man anxious about running into Jasmine today ...*

Owl Man was trying to get Fex moving. He'd been checking his watch throughout the conversation. He still hadn't decided whether it would be a good idea to run into Jasmine today, without feeling more settled in his conflict. But before Fex could get up and out of his chair, the door opened and no other flower than sweet Jasmine floated in. She looked and moved like a butterfly in a spring garden.

Fex was putting on his jacket—Size XXL—as Jasmine brushed past him. He turned just in time to see Jasmine lightly kissing Owl Man's cheek in greeting.

“Hey, you're here. Cool. Don't go away. I'll be right back.” Jasmine was obviously glad to see Owl Man.

She looked over her shoulder and said, “Oh, hi, Fex. Didn't see you at first.”

As she moved away toward the back room, Owl Man caught a scent—a very faint scent—of jasmine in the air. Poet's Jasmine, he reminded himself. Then he turned back to Fex, who was staring at Owl Man with a mischievous glint in his eye.

“Don't worry, Owl Man. I ain't gonna blow your cover. She's a little young for you but, hey, take what you can get, that's what I always say. That's Fex's motto.”

Owl Man was not inclined to play the role of disciple to Fex the Philosopher. Besides, for all practical purposes he had virtually vacated the scene. Without really intending it, some part of Owl



Man, like another person in his imagination, was most keenly aware of the fragrance of Poet's Jasmine in the air. It trailed off faintly, in the direction of the employees' room.

“Hey, Owl Man! Wake up!”

“Oh, Fex. I thought you'd left already. Sorry, sorry. Yes, OK then. We'll talk again before the heist. I'll see you around, Fex.”

And with that curt dismissal Owl Man grabbed Fex's arms, spun him around, and pushed him toward the door. It was only because Fex was so confused in his life and person at this point in time, only because his head wasn't “screwed on right,” that he permitted such otherwise offensive treatment. Besides, he needed Owl Man, though he didn't like the feeling at all.

Once Fex had finally disappeared, Owl Man turned toward the employees' area and stared fixedly on the door through which Jasmine had disappeared. He seemed temporarily frozen, like a rabbit trying to avoid detection by an owl, as he debated two alternatives: The first alternative was to stay and have another cup of coffee. The second alternative was to walk out the door while still a free man.

*Owl and Tully discuss a film ...*

Coffee would always win out, he knew, and so he sat, eyes glued to the employees' door and its promise. Owl Man's head jerked back as the door opened, banging against the wall, Tully bursting through and heading straight for him. Owl Man was dizzied by the disparity between the image of Jasmine he was expecting and the reality of Tully he got.

"Hey, Owl, me lassie Jasmine said you was out here. Got any more details for me on the filmin'?"

Owl Man was dizzied further by Tully's reference to "me lassie Jasmine," as if Tully was saying she was more than his employee. Could that be true? As quick to imagine as he was, Owl Man could not imagine this. No, Tully must mean only that she is "his" in the business sense only—his employee and nothing more. Still, he held on to the table edge to steady himself.

"Owl, you OK?"

"Just thinking on stuff, Tul. You know how I am."

"For sure that, me good man."

"As to the film, we're on and we are going to play it by ear. All you need is to be yourself, do what you do, shout out orders like you do, look after the ladies, you know ... just you. There is no script, no plan, nothing but just being yourself. Think you can do that?"

"Sounds easy enough, but what if I freeze, or can't think of

nothing?”

“Don’t even worry a penny about that. Heron Man’s going to be the director. He’ll cue you if you go silent, which I doubt, big man, because I never heard you silent for more than a few seconds ever since I been coming here.”

With that, Owl Man held up his cup and—fatefully, it would seem—said: “How about seconds?”

*Tully, Owl Man and Jasmine ...*

Tully didn't hesitate. With a sweep of his arm he gestured to Jimmy.

“James, me lad. Bring Mr. Owl here another *macchiato*.”

Tully pronounced the *t* as if it were a *d*. He was not one to fret over pronunciation—in any language other than Gaelic, that is, at which he was a real stickler.

“No, no, laddie,” he would say to someone trying to chat him up with an imitation brogue. “It’s not ‘Lock Lomond,’ it’s ‘Loccccchhhh Lomond,’” and he stretched out the glottal fricative like a nineteenth-century steam locomotive pulling out of Glasgow station. Then he would proceed to sing the entire song, at full volume. Still gathering steam, he would hum variations on the popular melody and speculate as to its true origins in medieval Scotland, after which he would go into the history of Loch Laomainn and the legends surrounding it—legends of goblins and Spanish galleons, which tales Tully invariably embellished.

“And to this day they never found that gold, though Old Man McClain claims he found a Spanish doubloon at the water’s edge one Witches’ Sabbath.”

Tully, in short, strained the patience of his listeners, whenever he touched on the subject of dear old Scotland.

Strained the patience, that is, of all listeners but Owl Man, who could match him story for story. Many a night the two grizzled

old-timers had held combat over a fifth of Lagavulin, “straight from Islay,” Tully would say, and “straight down the hatch,” Owl Man would reply. They vied to see who could tell the biggest lies.

“So I told him, then, I said, ‘Get out yer pipes, Mr. Duffy, and we’ll see who’s the—’”

Tully’s warrior-bard saga was interrupted by the return of Jasmine to the table.

The effect she had on Tully was immediate—as if a cannonball had breeched an oak palisade, splinters flying.

Or was it perhaps as if a mud-spattered knight had just caught a glimpse of his enchanted queen, released from her spell after years of captivity in the foul dungeon of Inchcruin, on the Loch.

Tully’s reaction was not lost on Owl Man.

“Hi, Tully. Hi, Owl Man,” said Jasmine, seemingly oblivious to the besotted fantasies of the two lovelorn Scots.

“Tully, we’ve got an order of fourteen *lattés* to go, with pastries, in about fifteen minutes. Meanwhile, I guess I’ll go buss those tables. Oh, and some guy wants to cash a check but I told him he’d have to ask you. Jimmy’s got a dental appointment and Tracey’s gonna be late, so it looks like I’ll be pretty busy.”

Jasmine walked away, all business.

The spell had definitely worn off the enchanted queen, and Tully sheathed his sword.

“Och! Whit d’ye make o that, Owl Man? Away she goes!”

“Och, aye, me Tully,” Owl Man replied, not knowing what else to say.

Tully, it seemed, was struck dumb. He looked at Owl Man, and they both looked back at Jasmine.

She, in the meantime, scurried around the coffee shop like a schoolmistress, keeping a sharp discipline over customers and staff alike.

“What happened, Owl? She were such a bonnie lassie,” Tully complained, as if the Jasmine of his fantasies had evaporated.

Of the two men, Tully seemed far and away the more disturbed, like an operatic baritone who has just seen his soprano—that would be Jasmine—swept away, not by the tenor—that would be Owl Man—but by the mocking chorus of customers demanding their refills.

Owl Man, of course, was quick to see the philosophical gold gleaming in the muck of their trampled emotions. Tully, in contrast, saw something far more tragic, darker, to such an extent that Owl Man was worried about his friend. Thus, he spent the better part of an hour trying to buck up Tully, who seemed ready to throw everything he owned into the Loch and jump in after it with his armor on.

Owl Man tried to explain in simple terms—after all, Tully was a “man of action” not a scholar—how a man could find his “Lady Soul” in the person of a woman who, when it came right down to it, turned out to be just a human being like oneself.

“They call it ‘projection,’ Tully. It’s like you’re a movie projector and the woman is a blank screen. You’re projecting *your* movie onto *her*.”

Of course, Owl Man was only too aware of how close to his own *cinema paradiso* he himself was teetering. But just now his friend needed the life preserver. He could always try to save himself later.

“It’s no use, Owl. You’ve got your books and your fancy education. Me, all I’ve got’s a heart too big for me chest. And now that big ol’ heart’s been broken.”

“It’s not so bad, Tully, you said yourself she’s young.”

“Might as well cut off me leg, Owl, and skip the tourniquet. Let me bleed to death.”

Owl Man labored heroically to save the patient, and when he finally left there *was* a pulse, but not much else.

“Aye, she were a bonnie one, she were,” was the last thing Tully said before Owl Man stood up to go.

Jasmine was still at the counter ringing up sales as Owl Man left.

It was past dark when Owl Man finally trudged back to his solitary room and opened a fresh bottle of Lagavulin, one he had been saving for a special occasion.

“This occasion will have to do,” he pronounced solemnly as he measured two fingers of the gleaming liquid into his best lead-crystal glass.

He closed his eyes and passed the open vessel under his nose. A clear running brook sprang up before him, overhung with heavy clumps of grass and sharp rocks. A mossy oak in the foreground barely cast a shadow in the filtered light, though the sun was high. A dark shape sat amidst the ragged branches, unmoving. A slight breeze stirred the stiff leaves.

Owl Man, eyes still closed, took the smallest sip and the liquid exploded onto his tongue in an aromatic burst of smoke and liquid flames.

Images surged through his mind as if he were flying over the countryside, leaving the running brook far behind. Centuries peeled away as Owl Man shed time and existed, for a moment at least, as owls had existed for millions of years.

By the time the initial, fiery sensation had faded, Owl Man found himself back in his room, in the most satisfied of conditions, alone with his imagination and a communion glass of Lagavulin.



*Owl Man's Date with Jasmine ...*

By the time 7:00 PM Saturday evening arrived, Owl Man had circumnavigated the emotional globe several times. He did this in a quest for equanimity and peace, though he went about it with the single-mindedness of Ahab pursuing the White Whale.

His goal was simply to quell the pounding of his heart, and to reef the storm-jib of his fantasies. In this he succeeded admirably. Thus, the Owl Man who climbed the stairs to Jasmine's apartment was a well-traveled man of discipline and resolve. When he reached the landing, he trod the wooden flooring as firmly as Ahab ever trod the Pequod's deck, and just as resolutely approached her door.

Heron Man had asked him earlier in the day if he wanted company—"just in case." In case of what, he didn't say, but it was of no matter, since Owl Man wouldn't hear of it.

"No, no, Heron Man," he explained, "I believe this is something I must resolve on my own. I'm sure Jasmine is a reasonable young woman and will understand completely when I tell her that I cannot see her again."

Girding his loins in this fashion, then, he set out to make the appointment.

Apartment 3-H was at the end of a long hall, next to a window that opened onto a rusty fire-escape. Owl Man stood in front of the door and listened. Music played softly within—Satie's *Gymnopédies* by the sound of it. He tapped gently on the door.

Instinctively, he timed his taps to the pulses of the gentle piano chords.

“Just a minute,” Jasmine called from within.

He was about to clear his throat when the door opened wide and Jasmine stood before him invitingly. She wore a dark brown-and-black silk Japanese kimono, with a black, full-length leotard underneath. Her hair was done up in back and held in place with two bamboo chopsticks. She wore half-frame reading glasses, faint lipstick and just a hint of jasmine perfume.

“Hi, Owl Man. You’re right on time. Come on in.”

For some reason Owl Man was surprised. He had spent days imagining this moment—composing speeches, staging dramatic entrances and exits, conjuring in his imagination enough potential costumes for Jasmine to wear that he could have dressed an entire film cast. In a few days he had covered as much emotional ground—in his fantasies—as most psychiatrists do in a month. So why was he surprised?

“What’s the matter, Owl Man? Are you just going to stand there? Come on in.” And Jasmine pulled him by the arm until he was inside the apartment. She closed the door firmly, and locked it behind her.

“Here, let me take your coat.” Jasmine slipped his coat off and hung it in a small coat closet. “Make yourself comfortable. Can I get you anything?”

This was not going according to Owl Man’s plan at all. His

script called for him to announce to Jasmine as soon as she opened the door, “Jasmine, I have decided that I cannot see you.”

Instead he found himself saying, “Nice place,” as he looked around the apartment like a rubber-necking tourist.

“Thanks. I like it here.”

Owl Man examined the collection of artifacts assembled on a small table that served as shrine or altar. He recognized a replica of the Snake Goddess of Crete, a small bronze reproduction of a Priapus figure, the Venus of Willendorf, and a statuette of Kali with a belt of skulls around her waist. An abalone shell held a stick of burning incense. And on the wall behind the shrine was a hand-painted scroll of exotic script.

“What’s the scroll?” Owl Man asked innocently.

“Oh, that’s a beautiful passage from the Kama Sutra. Do you read Sanskrit?”

He started to tell about the time he almost took a course in Sanskrit but the teacher contracted pneumonia and the class was cancelled. Before Owl Man got to the pneumonia part, however, Jasmine had brought a glass of something and put it into his hand.

“I hope you don’t mind. It’s my favorite.”

Owl Man looked down and found a tall champagne flute in his hand. He looked at Jasmine. She had one too. Both were full and sparkling.

“Cheers,” she said. “And welcome.”

“Cheers,” said Owl Man in response, since he couldn’t think

of anything else to say.

Jasmine took one sip, then a second, longer draft. Owl Man followed suit.

“Mmmmmmm. Good, isn’t it?” Jasmine held her glass up to the light and watched the bubbles for a moment. “I love champagne.”

As Owl Man drained the glass he wondered what had happened to the Jasmine he had last seen at Tully’s—the bitchy school-mistress, the disciplinarian.

“Uh, Jasmine?” Owl Man ventured.

“Yes?”

“About the other day at Tully’s.”

Jasmine filled his glass again as he gathered his thoughts.

“Oh, that. What a terrible day, Owl Man.” She didn’t wait for Owl Man to reply but kept talking.

“I’m sorry about that, Owl Man. Tully was being awful to me in the back room. He’s crazy. He thinks he’s going to marry me, Owl Man. He has some big fantasy about a castle in Scotland and how he’s a knight and I’m an enchanted princess.”

“Queen.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Queen. He thinks you’re an enchanted queen. At least that’s what I think he thinks.”

“Well, queen or princess, I’m neither. I’m a writer trying to pay the rent. I had to push him away when I was in the back room.

He keeps coming on to me, you know what I mean?”

Owl Man knew exactly what she meant because he had wanted to come on to her himself.

“Well, sure, I uh, sure, I know what you mean.”

“I know I was a bitch when I came back out that day, but I couldn’t tell you in front of Tully what was going on. So I just tried to concentrate on work, you know? I knew you’d understand.”

With that, Jasmine felt better, and guided Owl Man to a long couch. She pushed him gently down and sat next to him. He set his champagne glass on the coffee table and she filled it again. Then she filled hers again.

“Here. Let’s start over, OK? Forget about Tully. Let’s have a new toast, all over again.”

Owl Man couldn’t think of anything to do but raise his glass.

“Here’s to a long, loving, exciting relationship,” and she lifted the flute to her lips.

Owl Man took a sip at the same time and almost dropped the glass when he felt Jasmine’s hand on his thigh.

“You’re so cool,” she murmured. “I really dig you.”

Owl Man was feeling the champagne. He had completely forgotten his prepared speech, and was having trouble talking extemporaneously. In fact, he was having trouble talking at all.

“Here, let me take that for you,” and Jasmine put the two glasses on the table next to the now-empty bottle.

“Hey! Don’t you want to take off your shoes?”

“Oh no, I’m fine,” said Owl Man, as Jasmine reached down, pulled on his shoelaces and slipped his shoes off.

“Listen, Jasmine, don’t you think—?”

Jasmine had begun rubbing Owl Man’s feet and he found it hard to think.

“Doesn’t that feel good, Owl Man?”

In spite of himself, Owl Man let out a soft sigh. “Oh, yes, it does, Jasmine.”

“That’s better now. I can see that you’re finally relaxing.”

“Feels good, Jasmine. Yes, that feels good.”

Jasmine stood up, her kimono slightly open, and looked down at Owl Man. She took his glass, along with her own and the empty bottle, to the kitchen.

“Don’t fall asleep on me, now, Owl Man. I’ve got a surprise for you.”

In fact, Owl Man was on the verge of nodding off, but his head jerked upright when she spoke.

“Surprise?”

“Yes. Just wait. I’ve got a little surprise right now. The big surprise comes later.”

Owl Man sank back into the soft cushions and surveyed the room while Jasmine worked in the kitchen. Apart from the shrine area, the apartment was sparsely but tastefully furnished. An oriental carpet over oak flooring here. An overstuffed reading chair and modern floor lamp there. A pile of books on a small table next to the

chair. And an impressive row of bookcases brimming with books of all kinds. In the corner sat a computer desk with papers all over it. Down a hallway to the left he could see an open door—the bathroom, most likely. And beyond that, a closed door—the bedroom. Holy of holies.

“Nice place,” he said repetitively.

“Cool, Owl Man. Make yourself at home. *Mi casa es su casa.*”

A spurt of fantasies jetted out at the simple Spanish courtesy. My house is your house. Owl Man had just spent the better part of a week disciplining his imagination and fortifying his resolve. And here he sat while the fortifications crumbled all around him.

“I know I’m being unorthodox tonight, Owl Man, but that’s just who I am. I figured you for the unorthodox type too. Am I right?”

Once again, Jasmine had caught Owl Man unprepared. He bought some time with etymology, an old, trusted ploy.

“Let’s see. Unorthodox. From the Greek *ortho*, straight or right, plus *dox*, opinion or praise. So, if I’m unorthodox, that means I don’t have the right, straight opinion or belief that everyone else does.”

“That’s good, Owl Man. You remembered your etymology. So, if you’re unorthodox it means you don’t think like most people. It means you’re a little kinky, doesn’t it? Not in a bad way, of course.”

“Oh, yes, definitely kinky, but no, certainly not in a bad way, no.”

Frankly, at this point Owl Man was not too certain of anything. He felt himself falling into the kind of vortex in which certainties dropped away by the second. He waited, just to see what Jasmine would do next.

He did not wait long.

Jasmine brought in a tray of hors d’oeuvres she had prepared in advance.

“Let’s see now, Mr. Owl Man. How would you like some snacks? We’ve got ripe figs stuffed with almonds, warm brie, roasted jalapeño peppers, Mediterranean bread slices, various olives, Italian bread and whole wheat crackers.”

Jasmine put down the tray and brought a bottle of *Rioja* and two fresh stem-glasses. She filled them both with wine and offered one to Owl Man. Then she handed him a small tray with a plate, utensils and cloth napkin.

“Here, Owl Man. I recommend you try one of these peppers.”

“Aren’t jalapeño peppers the really hot ones?” Owl Man, though more relaxed than before, was still slightly apprehensive.

“No, silly, they’ve been roasted. They’re only hot when they’re raw. Try one.”

And Jasmine picked up a pepper and pushed it gently into Owl Man’s mouth.



“Now, just bite down on the end part. Start with half.”

Owl Man did as told.

“How is it?” Jasmine prompted.

“Mmmmm. Not bad. Tasty.” Owl Man was tempted to go further and say, “Not too hot at all,” when he began to feel a rush of blood to his mouth. In fact, the tissues of his mouth and tongue were in shock, as if the cells had been turned inside-out. Strangely, Owl Man at that moment thought of the exhaust lining in a jet turbine when it climbs to full thrust at take-off.

“Do, do, do you have any ... ”

“Any water? Of course I do, Owl Man. Is it too hot for you?”

Jasmine had a glass pitcher of ice water in reserve and brought Owl Man a full glass, with which he rinsed his mouth as quickly as he could. Then he took a full ice cube and rolled it around the burning tissues of tongue, cheeks and palate.

Jasmine watched sympathetically as Owl Man began to sweat, then she coolly popped an entire pepper into her mouth, all but the stem, that is.

“Mmmmm. Good.”

Things proceeded in this unorthodox way throughout the sumptuous, exotic meal Jasmine had prepared—every dish a known aphrodisiac. By the end, they had finished the red wine and were enjoying a glass of cognac.

After lingering over the cognac and chatting pleasantly, even intimately at times, they drifted over to Jasmine’s desk, where she

had pulled up a second chair.

“Come and sit, Owl Man. I want to show you some things I’ve been working on. Actually, ever since we met I’ve been dying to talk to you.”

Owl Man nodded vigorously. “Yes, yes. Me too!”

“You see, I’ve been reading *Moby Dick* and I’m struggling with Melville, the way Ahab struggled with the whale.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, like, on the one hand, it’s all so poetic, like the chapter on whiteness, for example. Or what about the line, when they’re becalmed, just sitting dead in the water, and he describes how the sun gets hotter and hotter, just hanging in the sky and time goes by so slowly, and he says, ‘A whole hour passed; gold-beaten out to ages.’ I mean, what an image, Owl Man. Time ... like hammered gold! I just love that.”

“Yes, yes, beautiful, Jasmine.” Owl Man gazed at the silk of her kimono, the angle of the chopsticks in her hair.

“And then there’s this crazy Fedallah character stuck in there like required reading in a philosophy department syllabus. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes, yes, I know exactly what you mean. I’ve had the same thought myself. As if Melville was trying to cram every bit of ancient mythology he could into the book, as if he had a vision that was too big for nineteenth-century orthodoxy to contain.”

“That’s it, exactly, Owl Man. That’s exactly what I’ve been

thinking. Oh, I knew it. I knew I was going to love you. It's like we're one mind, Owl Man. One mind ... and one body."

"And one soul." Owl Man completed the unanimous thought.

With that innocent comment, Owl Man's fine lecture to Jasmine turned to dust. His hard-won insights evaporated like sea spray. And without quite realizing it, Owl Man felt the last remaining splinters of his defensive fortification slip away, as if following the timbers and planks of the Pequod down into the vortex of the deep.

As he and Jasmine turned to other pleasures, then, the dog-eared copy of *Moby Dick* lay marooned on the desk, open to the last page, where Jasmine had underlined the final passage—"then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago."

*Owl Man reads one of Heron Man's backstories ...*

Owl Man's *imaginatio paradiso* was interrupted not by a gawking crow as he'd first thought, but by his telephone. Shaking his head did little to focus on the rude intrusion, and it wasn't until the sixth ring that he picked up.

"Hoot is it?" Owl Man pronounced the question in a high pitch, as he always did.

"Ah, Heron, so good of you to call. What's that you say? No, I've not checked my email today. Ah, yes, backstory. To be sure, it's still necessary. Wow! You've done that already? That too? Jesus, Heron, where have you gotten the time for all this? I must admit I've fallen behind, but yes, yes, I'll check now, and let you know. Yes, for sure. Tully's it is. See you there."

Owl Man hung up the phone and booted up. He was reminded that they had agreed to work separately on backstory for their characters, even if they never used any of the material directly. Heron, it seemed, had been feverishly working backstory on Coo; Fex's houseboat; Fex's car; Coo's old girl friend, Chelsea; an apparent sabotage of the houseboat; how Fex met Heather; Sal's story; Fex's youth; how Sal met Sally; even some trouble Jolene was having at the bank.

Good God! Owl Man had completely forgotten about backstory and now his email in-box was flooded with Heron's prodigious output! But, as is well known, owls know no guilt, but

take in all things with equanimity and muse on and on and on until something goes “pop” and presents itself, full blown so to speak, as Athena from Zeus’s head, and the wide-eyed birds go wider still.

The subject line of the first email was “Fex and Heather Meet.” Owl poured a good bit more Lagavulin, settled into his “owl’s nest” chair as he called his cappuccino-leather lounge and began to read aloud.

*Over the years, the starter motor on Fex’s ’66 Lincoln had worn a groove on the pinion gear that drove the flywheel while cranking over the big, long-stroke V-8 engine. Similarly, a tooth on the flywheel was chipped. Periodically the two worn spots lined up, like a conjunction between planets with differing cycles. When that happened Fex—or preferably Coo—had to get out and push the enormous car a foot or two with the brake off and the transmission in gear. Then, and only then, would it start.*

*This was one of those “periodical” mornings. Instead of whirring, the starter motor just chattered.*

*“Shit.”*

*It was early enough in the day that Fex had not risen to his usual eloquence. But he was in a strangely ebullient mood, so he just put the shift lever into Drive, released the emergency brake and told Coo to get out and rock the car back and forth.*

*He and Coo were going for a spin in the big Lincoln. “Give her a little spankin’,” he called it. There were two reasons for Coo’s presence. One was so Fex would have an audience. The other was*

*in case of a flat tire or starter trouble. Coo was the designated tire-changer and car pusher.*

*Coo dutifully pushed the Lincoln forward a few inches, then eased up. He pushed again, then eased up. When he hopped back in the car, Fex twisted the ignition key, the starter whirred briefly and the engine kicked over. A short plume of blue smoke puffed out the tailpipe, until Fex gunned the engine to “clear out the cobwebs,” as he put it.*

*“Atta baby.” Fex patted the dashboard. He was as proud of his car as a 4-H girl at a County Fair is proud of her finely-groomed heifer.*

*Once satisfied the engine was running properly, he put the transmission back in gear and flowed slowly out of the parking lot. The Continental made headway the way a Chris Craft cruiser does when motoring out of the marina.*

*It was May, and the weather was unusually warm and clear for Seattle. Fex had no particular plans. He enjoyed the smooth ride, the heft, the rumbling sound, the expansive legroom of the car. The combination of the car and the mild weather were irresistible.*

*“Hey, Coo! Let’s go to the Seattle Center. I wanna watch them rides.”*

*Without waiting for Coo’s reply Fex steered a course for the Space Needle, Seattle’s best-known landmark. The Lincoln hummed along as Fex pulled on a big cigar. Coo had tried cigars once, following Fex’s orders, but they made him sick so he had given them*

*up. Still, he enjoyed the pungent aroma swirling inside the car, though he cracked the wind wing open a little.*

*The starter motor trouble had not deterred Fex from his expansive mood. There's just somethin' about today, he thought, somethin' good. Coo liked being with Fex when he was happy.*

*Soon the Space Needle loomed ahead and its towering immensity dwarfed the big Lincoln and everything else within a large radius. After parking the car in a lot, Fex and Coo got out and, involuntarily, both of them craned their necks to look upward at the Needle, like hick tourists visiting New York City for the first time.*

*Far above, tourists in both the rotating restaurant and the observation platform were gawking at the ant-sized people on the ground, Fex and Coo among them. Fex loved coming here, though he had never gone up into the Needle. "Too high," he said flatly. His pupils shrank whenever he imagined going up inside that swaying tower.*

*Coo knew exactly where he was headed: To the bumper car pavilion. Fex would have loved to go on the ride with Coo, smashing into little cars driven by small children, but his legs didn't fit inside the small cars. Therefore he dismissed it as a "pussy ride." Once again, his masculinity asserted itself in new and inventive ways.*

*Coo paid the fee to the attendant and waited for the next "ride" to begin. Meanwhile Fex bought himself two cotton candies*

*and some popcorn. Just a little snack to keep me goin', he explained to no one in particular. Taking a strategic bench in the sun, Fex settled back to enjoy his cotton candy and to "watch the birds," attractive female specimens of which seemed to appear from nowhere on spring days like today.*

*The bumper car attendant pulled the lever that sent electricity coursing through the overhead grid, activating little electric motors that propelled the small cars. The steering mechanisms were designed to promote over-steering, making collisions all the more likely, all the more thrilling. Coo immediately began running into every car within reach. Children were crying while anxious mothers scowled from the perimeter. But Coo was transported, oblivious. All in fun, he hummed aloud, laughing as he smashed head-on into a car driven by a teen-age girl with braces.*

*Fex had polished off both cotton candies and was half-way through his popcorn when his eyes popped open. He glanced over to see Coo paying for another ride. Good, he thought, Coo's still busy. He quickly turned back in the direction of what had drawn his intense interest. Not more than twenty-five feet away, directly in his line of vision, in full sunlight, there strutted the most resplendent, exotic bird he had ever seen in his life.*

*Like a long-legged, long-necked wading bird, she walked delicately, as if trying to avoid stepping on sea urchins in the shallows. The red-feather stole around her shoulders sprang out like fireworks. Her neck undulated with each step, and she paused*



*frequently, as if detecting unseen prey she was about to snap up into oblivion.*

*“This bird is friggin’ taller than I am!” Fex spoke the words aloud, though he shushed himself immediately. He didn’t want to scare the dazzling creature away. A few more steps and she would be standing in shadow. Fex was mesmerized. His eyes shifted back and forth between shadow and sunlight, calculating the distance, the number of steps before this beauty would lose the back-lit luminosity of the sun, and the vision disappear.*

*He set his popcorn down and was about to stand up when the bird suddenly crumpled, nearly falling to the ground. Fex flew up like a giant eagle and caught the frail thing in his arms. One of the stiletto heels on her shoes had broken, but Fex had carried her up to safety, back to his nest where the half-finished bag of popcorn lay.*

*“Are you OK, baby?”*

*The words, the tenderness, the concern that emanated from Fex surprised even him, who had “seen everything.”*

*“Yeah, I ... I think so.” And the creature’s eyes turned to Fex’s. In that moment, eye to eye, soul to soul, one of those timeless moments took place that poets have celebrated in verse, and traveling bards have chanted in melodious song, since Adam first glanced at Eve under the tree, in the garden, in the heavenly sunlight.*

*Even the crashing of bumper cars and the shrieks of children*

*could not penetrate or disturb that moment.*

*Fex was almost cooing like a dove as he struggled to form words: "Who ... who ... who are you?" he asked with utmost tenderness.*

*"Who, me?" the bird replied.*

*"Yeah, you. Who else?"*

*And then they both burst out laughing.*

*For some reason Fex wanted to keep this amazing, beautiful bird as his "little secret," so when Coo had exhausted the pleasures of the bumper cars, Fex approached him, gave him cab fare and told him to go back to the marina where he had left his car. Fex would call him in the morning. Coo did not question the order, but went off in search of a taxi stand. Fex trotted back to the bench where the bird was munching his leftover popcorn.*

*Meanwhile, she had called the girlfriends with whom she had ridden to the Center, telling them, somewhat indelicately, to "shove off," that she had a ride home.*

*Now Fex the Eagle and the Lady Bird were perched together, and deliciously alone.*

*Fex gallantly broke off the heel of the lady's other shoe, so at least she could walk evenly. "Don't worry, baby. I'll buy ya new ones," he said. Then he found a concession booth that sold running shoes, frisbies and umbrellas. They looked over the offerings until she found a pair of shoes she liked. Fex bought them for her.*

*"Make it two pair for the lady," he told the sales person.*

*“And what’s your name, pal?”*

*“Joseph, sir, but call me Joe.”*

*“OK, Joey, here’s a little tip for you.” And a lavish tip it was that Fex held out, hesitating just long enough so that “the lady” could see the wad of bills he flourished toward the appreciative Joey.*

*“Thank you, sir. Thank you very much.”*

*The giddy couple walked out of the store, bumping hips and elbows, then proceeded to laugh and splurge their way across the Fun Forest, trying every ride except the ferris wheel. The lady wanted to try it but Fex said it was boring. “Too high,” he explained.*

*At one point, Fex stopped and said, “Hey, wait a minute. What’s your name anyway?”*

*The bird said, “Heather Winsnip.”*

*And Fex replied with a grand gesture, “Call me Fex.”*

*“OK, Fexie,” the bird twittered.*

*Normally Fex would protest any unauthorized alteration of his name, but in this case he was compliant, undeviating in his good mood.*

*“This is the best friggin’ day of my friggin’ life,” said Fex exuberantly.*

*“Me too,” replied Heather Winsnip.*

*Then she laughed, and to Fex it sounded like the tinkling of tiny silver bells.*

*On two other occasions in his life, while gambling, Fex had felt like he couldn't lose. This was another one of those days, number three. He won every game, hit every bull's eye, scored maximum points every time. He rang the bell with the sledgehammer time after time. After an hour Heather was carrying an armful of stuffed animals Fex had won for her. "Not bad, huh, baby?"*

*For the rest of that day, Fex walked with an extra spring in his step. When he emerged from a short rest room break near the Space Needle, Heather was waiting. She noticed that his Ascot had been re-arranged with flair and that his red Pompadour was a half-inch higher than when he had gone in. Heather noticed little things like that.*

*Fex and Heather spent the next four days together. Fex cancelled Coo, told him to "take a vacation." He called Sal and told him he would be "away" for a while.*

*He also called Manny and told him to order that new starter motor and flywheel they had talked about. Told him to postpone all the other jobs he had lined up.*

*"I'm gonna need this car to start on time, Manny."*

*"Sure thing, Fex, sure thing. I'll order the parts today. They should be here tomorrow. Soon as you bring it in I'll get right on it."*

*While they were lying in bed one night, Fex confided to*

*Heather that he didn't ever need to go up inside the Space Needle.*

*"How come, Fexie?" Heather asked.*

*Fex withheld his reply for dramatic effect, then said:*

*"Baby, I'm on top of the world."*

Owl Man loved reading aloud. But it was late now, sleep called, dreams, perhaps of Jasmine, were in wait.

*Owl Man's owl, Jasmine's dream ...*

When he finally retired for the night Owl Man noticed he was in a strange mood. Not troubled, not agitated exactly, but in some curious way ... expectant. It was as if he fully expected something significant to happen, a dream perhaps, but he had no idea what the subject might be.

“Is this a premonition of a premonition?” he muttered under his breath.

He went through a diagnostic checklist while practicing his nightly Land of Nod breathing exercises. First, the somatic factors. He felt fine, was not feverish, detected no physical symptoms whatsoever. OK, soma is satisfactory.

Was it the Lagavulin? Probably not, since the fine Scotch was a soporific and always induced in him the most pleasurable and relaxed of moods. Not the Lagavulin, then.

Was there perhaps some unfinished emotional business left over from the day, something he hadn't noticed or attended to? All he could think of was Heron Man's phone call regarding the back-stories in Owl Man's email in-box. But, again, Owl Man was well aware of his owl-like disinclination to feel guilty. Like an owl, he tended to take things as they came. No lurking guilt, then.

Was it Heron Man's back-story itself, about how Fex and Heather met? Owl Man thought for a moment. True, the story was a bit long, but at bottom, it was simply a delightful read. Nothing

disturbing in it at all, unless you counted Coo's aggressiveness in the Bumper Car concession and the crying children. But that was all tongue-in-cheek humor. Besides, the story showed a softer, human side to Fex. No, it was definitely not the back-story.

Nothing Owl Man thought of seemed to click. And then suddenly he had it.

"Of course," he practically shouted. "Of course! I should have thought of this first thing. I must be slipping."

What he should have thought of "first thing" was the event that had just taken place—*after* finishing his Lagavulin, *after* finishing the last entry in his computer journal, and *before* going to bed. Of course! Only twenty minutes ago he had stepped outside for a brief look at the moon, a habit he had formed long ago, and which always had a soothing effect on him. The moon reminded him of how connected everything is. The pull of the tides upon oceans and bodies alike. The regularity of cycles, human and heavenly, each pulled in different degrees, but always according to the same cosmic pulse.

The only thing different about tonight had taken place in a flash. He had been looking up at the moon through the branches of a tree, when he was startled by a great pair of wings flaring out before him. An enormous owl had swooped down from a rooftop, swerved sharply in front of Owl Man, then disappeared behind a clump of thick shrubs. It happened so fast that it seemed almost an apparition. But there was no doubt about it. An owl had presented itself to him

in moonlight—the owl’s daytime—then vanished.

Yes, of course! It was Owl Man’s namesake, the silent hunter, the wide-eyed, night-seeing, sharp-beaked, terrible-taloned owl, the mythic creature whose presence had guided, and warned, human beings and their intuitions for hundreds of thousands of years. Yes, the owl, and its uncanny appearance. *That* is what set Owl Man churning tonight, just when he had been so relaxed, so peaceful, so ... open.

Whenever an owl crossed Owl Man’s path, he invariably felt watchful, alert, expectant—owl-like, perhaps. The bird always brought a sense of portent, as if something important was “in the air.”

And hadn’t Heron Man often expressed the same feeling about herons? Didn’t their appearance always presage or portend something significant in his life?

Having located the proximal source of his anticipatory mood, Owl Man spent a few delicious moments savoring the feeling of wonder, the mystery in himself and in the world.

Then he settled down into his feathered bed and opened himself again, this time to the busy, scurrying night-world of owls and dreams, and whatever tasty morsels they would offer up by morning.

Owl Man did not make it to morning.

That is to say, he spent the entire night in a kind of half-sleep, in which he was both asleep and yet awake, unconscious yet



aware. And what filled his awareness were visions, as if he were seeing not a dream but an actual presence—not in his room, of course, but in the very real chambers of the imaginal mind.

Owl Man knew himself well enough, and was familiar enough with dreams, to realize that this vision had an unusual, objective quality. Yes, it was imaginary, yet at the same time it was real—an actual presence in his imagination. *Something was really there.*

And what was this recurring vision that so vividly attended him throughout his wakeful slumber?

It was a face, hovering before him, looking straight into his eyes, with deep understanding and compassion. If he had to describe the feeling-tone of the vision, of this floating face, he would have said: *It is destiny, come to meet me face to face.*

Of course the vision was beyond words, beyond language. Like so many dream images, it defied definition. But in effect, something destined, in the form of a face, was trying to reach him through the byways of the *mundus imaginalis*.

And though the face shifted and changed, showing different qualities and aspects, it was essentially one face. Owl Man shivered when he realized that the features belonged to someone he knew. It was the face of Jasmine.

So, there he had it. A conjunction had occurred between the appearance of the owl in reality, and the appearance of Jasmine's face in his imagination, a conjunction he could not ignore. The owl

marked the event as important, but it would require a Delphic oracle to put words to it, however enigmatic.

Owl Man finally woke to the sound of birds, in the hour before dawn. And at once, great questions reverberated through his soul: What does Jasmine have to do with the owl? Is the owl a person? Is Jasmine a bird? What is the destiny in this? How must I respond to this conjunction, this phenomenal “coincidence,” that bears upon me so heavily?

How, indeed, Owl Man?

Considering how little sleep he had had, Owl Man felt strangely invigorated. The sense of anticipation that accompanied him to bed was still with him. It accompanied him to the coffee machine and from there to his computer, where he immediately set out to record the visionary events of the night, lest he forget. He carried with him the pad on which he had already scribbled a note: “Vision. Two apparitions. Owl. Face. Jasmine.”

As he brought the first cup of hot espresso to his lips the phone rang unexpectedly.

“Who the hell is this?” he grumbled aloud. But as soon as he said it, the floating face came back to mind, and Owl Man felt an uncanny certainty as he picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Owl Man, it’s Jasmine. I need to talk to you.”

“Of course, Jasmine, what’s it about?”

“I had a dream last night, Owl Man. You were in it.”

“In a dream? Wonderful!”

“Not just a dream, Owl Man. It was real. *You were really here.*”

*Owl Man and Jasmine discuss her dream ...*

“Dreams are like that,” Owl Man said into the phone, attempting his most soothing and expert tone in response to Jasmine’s odd combination of urgency and menace. “Desire can so inflame the image of desire, that, as in the alchemical oven, the semblance of things became things, or so much so there was no telling the difference between semblance and reality.”

“Bullshit. Save that stuff for your book fans. You can’t explain away what happened last night. Nor what you did.”

*What in God’s name could she be going on about?*

“What did I do, my dear?” Owl Man adopted a “keep her talking” stance and let go of defending, although what he was defending for or against he could not say.

“Knock off that ‘my dear’ stuff too.” Jasmine was gearing up. “You have no memory of it, Owl? I can’t believe that. There’s no way in hell you could have known about what I’ve always wanted because I’ve never told a goddamn fucking soul about it. And you walk in here and give it to me.” Full throttle.

“But—”

“No buts, Owl Man. You gotta know you aren’t the first guy that’s wanted to—”

It was Owl Man’s turn to interrupt. “There’s no surer certainty than that, Jasmine. But I can assure you that I have been very much resident here throughout the night and whoever you

experienced trying to, trying to, well whatever, it was not me.”

“You don’t understand. It was you and I can prove it. Get your ass down here now and I’ll show you.”

Owl Man could not remember when someone slammed down a phone on him, if ever that had happened. He booted up his computer. As he waited, he took some deep breaths along with some deep sips of his coffee. Once available, he checked his email and, once again, saw all the backstory files Heron had sent. But nothing else new. He wrote out a brief e-mail to Heron Man telling him he’d be at Tully’s meeting with Jasmine and if he came in not to interrupt until they were done.

That taken care of, he closed up the machine, grabbed his cap, and set off. Surely, he’d get his 500 mg of caffeine today with ease. He knew the caffeine bath was good for his brain as long as it was before noon. No problem.

As soon as Owl Man opened the door at Tully’s, Jasmine was at him, pushing him out of the coffee shop.

“I don’t want to talk in there, Owl Man. Let’s walk.” There was no brooking Jasmine’s commands.

“You were there.”

“That’s what you said on the phone.”

“And somehow you knew. I want to know how you knew.”

“Jasmine. Listen to me. I have no idea what you are referring to, but let me tell you something that happened to me last night. I had an encounter with an owl, which is always ... always,

significant to me. And later in sleep or half-sleep or maybe it was wide-awake, I had a vision, and the vision was you. I won't say it was a vision *of* you. It was you as real as you are here now except your face, your wondrous face, was large and grew larger, quite beyond any reality of you. So, however it might be named, we had some sort of experience of one another, that was very real to each of us, yet not real in the sense of you and me walking as we are now. But how it is different, I am at a loss to say."

"Must be pretty strange for you, Owl Man, to be at a loss for words, being a word man and all. But I do like it that you told me. But there's more to it, Owl Man. You don't understand." Jasmine reached out and took hold of Owl Man's arm, stopping him. She looked into his eyes.

"You were going to show me what you called proof."

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Owl Man. This is hard for me. I've never told anyone about this. Ever since I was a little girl I had a dream, a real dream, a dream I had many times. I would hold out my hand and a man would approach and place it in my hand. And I would raise it to my lips and kiss it. But when I woke up, it was not there. Ever. Until last night." Jasmine's eyes were tearing and beginning to send rivulets down her cheeks as she stared up into Owl Man's curiosity.

"You can tell me. It's OK." Owl Man leaned in and with her mention of kiss he was starting to hold his breath.

“It was this.” Jasmine reached into her pocket and pulled it out and showed Owl Man.

It was an old, very old, *Mont Blanc* fountain pen.

*The Magic Mont Blanc ...*

Owl Man stared at the pen. “This is not possible,” he whispered hoarsely. “May I see that, Jasmine?”

She held the valuable writing instrument out to Owl Man, who carefully took it in his hands and scrutinized it closely. He turned it over and over. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small magnifying lens he carried with him. After closer examination he handed the pen back to Jasmine.

“I think I need to sit down.”

Jasmine looked at Owl Man inquisitively. He appeared to have stopped breathing—his chest was still, as if his diaphragm had frozen solid. Jasmine looked up again and saw the blood draining from Owl Man’s face. He began reeling unsteadily.

“Owl Man! Are you OK?” Jasmine reached for Owl Man’s hand. It was cold.

Owl Man didn’t reply, but leaned into her as if he was about to faint. Before he could fall, however, she threw both arms around him, half-pulling, half-carrying him across the sidewalk to a bus-stop bench and its protective enclosure.

“Owl Man, talk to me!” she commanded.

His head rolled loosely on his shoulders as Jasmine steadied him. A passing businessman paused warily and watched them for a moment.

“Lady, is that old drunk bothering you?” he asked suspiciously.



“He’s not an old drunk, can’t you see that? He’s an eminent scholar. He’s just resting. We’re talking.”

“You’re sure you don’t need help? I can call the cops.” Now the businessman was definitely annoying Jasmine, sticking his nose into *her* business.

“I’m positive. Can you just leave us alone now? Mind your own business?”

“Okay, ma’am, have it your way,” the businessman said, obviously disgruntled. He went off to his business, whatever that was.

She turned back to Owl Man, who was sitting quietly, staring across the street.

“Owl Man, if you don’t start talking to me pretty soon I’m going to be pissed!”

“Jasmine, I, I don’t—”

“Come on, Owl Man, now you’re scaring me. Did you blow a head gasket or something?”

“No, no, Jasmine, I’m fine. It’s just that ... just give me a minute. I need to gather my thoughts.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Owl Man. Spit it out!”

Before Owl Man could spit it out, however, a group of people crowded into the enclosure to escape the Seattle mist and catch the bus that was just coming to a stop, brakes squealing. The pneumatic doors hissed open and the passengers bustled on board. The doors closed again and the enormous vehicle roared off into

traffic, trailing in its wake a cloud of diesel exhaust and the smell of vulcanized rubber.

The commotion had given Owl Man time to gather himself. He turned to face Jasmine.

“I’m feeling better now, Jasmine. I’m sorry if I frightened you. I just felt a little light-headed there for a moment. Now I owe you an explanation, at least as much as I can.”

“You certainly do, Owl Man, an eloquent explanation. But don’t bullshit me this time.”

“You see, Jasmine ... that’s my pen.”

“Your what?”

“That’s my Mont Blanc pen you’re holding. I’ve had it for many years. It’s the most soulful writing instrument I’ve ever owned. Anyone who touches it partakes of its soulfulness. It’s quite valuable, in and of itself. And I haven’t the faintest idea how it came into your possession.”

“Owl Man, this is starting to scare me. Are you sure this is your pen? How can you tell?”

“Look. Take a close look at the nib. On the left-hand side as you look down the barrel, from the back toward the tip, you’ll see a minute scratch, almost microscopic, just at the point where the nib flares out. It’s no longer than a hummingbird’s tongue is wide.” Owl Man opened the pocket lens again for Jasmine and handed it to her.

“Yes, I see it.”

“That scratch has been there for years. I never had it

polished out because it's my identifying mark, so to speak. I could pick this pen out of a box of a thousand—given enough time, of course.”

“But what does that mean? It may be your pen, but the whole thing is still not possible, is it?”

Owl Man looked at Jasmine. The color had returned to his cheeks, which now felt like they were burning.

“I know it's bizarre. It's not possible. And yet we're witnesses to it. Something's going on here, Jasmine, and I'm afraid it's bigger than the two of us.”

Jasmine shuddered. “This is creepy, Owl Man. It's like the pen is haunted, or there's a poltergeist or something. I mean, if you didn't sneak into my apartment and plant the pen there somehow, then ... how did it get there? It's like those old Star Trek episodes, as if you were Kirk and you said, ‘Beam this Mont Blanc pen over to Jasmine's apartment tonight, Scotty.’”

Jasmine became suddenly quiet and pensive. So did Owl Man.

“I know,” Owl Man finally said haltingly, “that this ... violates all our beliefs about ... time and space—excuse me, space-time—and I'm just as ... confused ... as you are.”

“But you're not as surprised as you're letting on, Owl. I can tell. You've seen things like this before, haven't you?”

“What do you mean, Jasmine?”

“I don't know what I mean. I just have a suspicion about

you. That you've seen a lot of weird things happen, things that violate the laws of physics. I bet that's why Fex calls you a 'witch doctor.' I've heard him say it several times at Tully's. It's as if you know how to 'bend' time-space more than it's already bent."

"Curved, you mean?"

"OK, curved. But don't change the subject. You're a witch doctor, aren't you?" Jasmine paused again, then she fixed Owl Man with *her* wide-eyed, owl-like stare. She rotated her head sharply, nearly 180 degrees, it seemed, then looked back at him directly, devouringly.

"Well?"

Owl Man sniffed the traffic fumes and ruffled up his scarf around his ears. For a moment, Owl Man and Jasmine—each of them a sharp, observant soul at heart—could have been mistaken for two owls that had inexplicably taken shelter in an urban bus-stop enclosure. Simultaneously, as if by telepathic communication, they both stood, and without saying a word, walked a short distance to the Dunkin' Donuts shop, down the block from Tully's.

Over donuts and coffee, they dropped their owlish demeanor and began talking intensely. Owl Man told Jasmine all about the Mont Blanc pen and how it had come into his possession, years before. They exchanged hypotheses—from the rational to the far-fetched—regarding the mysterious "coincidence" of dream and pen. They discussed the theory of relativity, the Uncertainty Principle and whether quantum physics held any implications for the macro-

world of daily life. Owl Man explained to Jasmine his rather elaborate theory of what he called “the relativity of time and space in dreams.”

For her part Jasmine, though she was neither as old as Owl Man nor as well-read, was perceptive and intelligent enough that she followed his arguments and challenged him rightly on many subtle points. At one point the two of them even found themselves comparing their favorite poems and ribald jokes.

The Dunkin’ Donuts staff, far from being irritated by these “loungers,” were actually mesmerized, and took their time bussing the adjacent tables. They wanted to catch, if they could, even small fragments of this unusual conversation.

Finally Jasmine took Owl Man’s hand and looked him directly in the eye.



“Owl, there’s one thing we haven’t covered yet.”

“And what would that be, my dear?”

“You still haven’t told me *how you knew*.”

*The Shadow Knows ...*

“I didn’t know and I don’t know now how the knowing became the known.” The umber java had worked its magic helping Owl Man recover from his spell. He was now in full professorial bloom.

“Fuck that,” Jasmine blurted out louder than she intended, to the delight of the eavesdropping Dunkin’ Donut crowd and table-bussers unable to suppress snickers, hand-to-mouth cover-ups of giggles now competing with coughing fits here and there on  chocked  on bits of fry-cakes.

“Jasmine, please, hold your fire.” Owl Man’s order had the desired effect on Jasmine whose next words froze on her lips before escaping.

Owl Man continued. “You remember the old radio program: ‘The Shadow,’ which always included in its introduction the phrase, ‘... the Shadow knows’”? Probably not, you are too young. In this case, I think it’s the owls that know, something like ‘a little bird told me,’ except the bird or birds did not tell me, but they are involved, Jasmine. Sitting here in your presence, something has happened. I

know it. Somehow they knew your desire for the pen, they knew I had one, they knew what to do, and how to do it. They worked through dreams to make things happen. When you talk about Scotty beaming up the pen to your place you are talking about the future, but it's now Jasmine, it happens now. Trust me on this."

Owl Man's oration brought a silenced Jasmine to tears. As he watched the little tear-lets breach their confines, he reached beneath his owl-bedecked sweatshirt and pulled out a small notebook. He placed it before Jasmine, uncapped the Mont Blanc, offered it to her.

Only after dabbing at her streaming tears, not quick enough to keep a few from falling upon the blank page of the notebook set before her, Jasmine accepted the offering, looking at the exquisite instrument with some strange admixture of fear and awe.

"Write," Owl Man ordered.

*Jasmine writes ...*

After some preliminary squirming and fiddling, Jasmine finally settled into the task Owl Man had imposed upon her. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and waited. Long seconds passed as the golden nib of the majestic Mont Blanc hovered over the snowy paper of Owl Man's notebook.

Then Jasmine opened her eyes and lowered the pen to the page.

At first she tested the flow of ink. With one smooth stroke she drew the nib straight across the pad, then again, in an undulating, serpentine line. She was surprised to find that the ink in Owl Man's pen was *brown*. For a moment she had a strange fantasy—that the ink had been made from dried blood, ground to a fine powder with some alchemist's mortar and pestle.

Jasmine glanced up at Owl Man. Now *his* eyes were closed, and he seemed to be humming or chanting, under his breath. She looked back at the pad, amazed to find the pen working its way across the narrow page. Words flowed from the golden nib in a liquid stream, like blood from the side of Christ. She did not try to read what she was writing, but simply let the pen—and whoever or whatever was behind it—do the work. The nib worked in short strokes and long, in arcs and jots, circles and spears, the words composing themselves quite independently of Jasmine's will.

The very air in the Dunkin' Donuts shop seemed filled with words, and each word bore wings. Conversations around her faded



to a distant buzz as Jasmine lost herself to the magic pen and the words flowing from it.

In this manner, one small urban donut shop served, for a few moments at least, as a time-space portal for the spirit of language. It was as if, from the teeming ether, words tumbled through the moist Seattle atmosphere into the warm, redolent donut shop, where they were funneled into the gleaming Mont Blanc pen, to flow in an unbroken stream onto the creamy page.

Jasmine paused. She could feel that Owl Man had opened his eyes and was looking at her. When she glanced up, he was indeed looking at her, and his eyes were enormous. Jasmine was accustomed to being ogled by men, who often looked at her in scanning, evaluating and sometimes penetrating ways. This was different. Owl Man's gaze was passive, openly receptive and night-like. She felt that, if she looked into his eyes long enough, she would be able to see green leaves and galaxies.

The lighting in the donut shop was standard-issue— industrial and fluorescent—but Owl Man seemed to be radiating his own light. Not fluorescent light—not Cool White—this light was warm and golden. Jasmine looked around the room. The staff and customers, the very space itself, were also glowing, and she felt a similar golden radiance emanating from herself. *Is this what the nimbus in a religious painting is supposed to depict?* she wondered to herself.

Jasmine lowered the pen.

“Owl Man,” she whispered. “What just happened?”

For what seemed a long time, Owl Man did not speak. Then he said quietly, “That’s the *now* I was talking about.”

Jasmine slowly capped the Mont Blanc, which felt unusually warm. What happened next took place in slow motion. It was a spontaneous yet strangely scripted, choreographed series of motions and gestures—Kabuki in a coffee shop.

Reaching out with her left hand, she placed the black pen carefully in Owl Man’s left hand and closed his fingers over it.

Next, she covered his left hand with her own. Left over left.

Then she closed the notebook with her right hand and Owl Man reached across the table to place his right hand over Jasmine’s. Right over right.

It was all completely unrehearsed, yet ritualized. Owl Man and Jasmine sat without moving, hands and arms cross-linked, like figures in a medieval woodcut.

At that moment the door opened and Heron Man walked slowly into the shop. Looking once around the room, he stopped in mid-stride, like a heron wading in the shallows. The entire space seemed to be floating in a kind of gravitational suspense. No one spoke. Bussers held their black tubs in the air. Customers, in freeze-frame poses, held dripping jelly donuts in their fingers, mouths agape. The young cashier stared at Owl Man and Jasmine with a dreamy look on her face.

Heron Man could hear his own heart beating.

Then he approached the table where Owl Man and Jasmine sat entranced. He stopped a full pace from the table, paused again, then said softly:

“Looks like I just missed the party.”

*Jasmine and the Agatha Christie ...*

“It was no party you missed, Mr. Heron. It’s a god-damned fuckin’ mystery, is what it is, and I’m scared.” Jasmine stood and hugged herself, as if wrapping her arms about her could stop her shaking.

“Ah, I see you’ve met the Agatha Christie. No doubt you feel clueless.” Heron Man pulled out a chair and sat looking up at Jasmine with a big smile.

“What’s so funny? And what’s this about Agatha Christie?” Jasmine continued her stance enclosed in her own arms.

“Tell her, Owl.” Heron Man reached over and touched the pen in Owl Man’s hand.

Owl Man took the pen and held it up for Jasmine to look at. “Yes, Jasmine, it’s one of the Mont Blanc writer’s limited edition pens. This one is indeed the Agatha Christie. See the silver snake with ruby eyes that forms the clip? And look again at the nib. See the snake? The snake is meant to personify the creepy-crawly feeling in her crime.”

“Did she write with it?” Heron Man did not often break in on Owl Man’s lectures, but he had no hesitancy in doing so on this occasion.

“Yes.” Owl Man and Jasmine spoke at the same time.

“What was written, Jasmine?” Heron Man stood up and repeated his words, the odd question hanging in the air.

“I ... I don’t know. It just ... ” Jasmine let go of herself and

slumped in the chair, unable to finish.

“Wrote itself,” Heron Man said completing the sentence for her. “Yes. But what was it that got written? Can we hear? Can you read it aloud?”

Jasmine looked down at the little notebook where the pen had written its words. Her brow wrinkled as it does in puzzlement. She looked up at Heron Man and then at Owl Man. Back and forth. She shook her head as she announced, “I don’t know what the hell this is about.”

“Read it,” Heron Man insisted.

Jasmine complied, reading the words as if she had been instructed to go slower than slow.

*“The plan ... will not work ... unless ... Jasmine ... is included ... in the writing ... and even more ... in the dreaming.”*